

# A Dark Address

poems



R.M. Haines



# A Dark Address

R.M. Haines

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Cover concept by R.M. Haines

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for Molly

1999

That summer, I was sick.  
Detox. Panic. Fear of sleep.  
My studies had been a success.  
Now, each day, I drove for hours  
getting lost among the dark corn.  
Ohio. Nowhere. Far inside.

I was told I could be a sorter—  
I could take home a receipt.  
In a hangar, watching the slow  
stream of objects the conveyor belt  
poured: cosmetics, canisters of film,  
Valium, crickets in a box,

a river of uses. I did the job.  
Detached, I lifted each thing out,  
sorting it onto its proper belt  
while my nerves sent screams  
across their stitched together paths.  
In the surface of one rusted

metal bin, I studied scrapes  
crazing like veins until the face  
of nothing I knew bled through  
and gave itself to the light.  
Futures. Strange signatures.  
A voice called me to break.

What lives on in the cracks?  
Whose traces do we keep?  
Dead labor. An old cassette.  
The signal fed back into its own  
torqued waves until the noise  
breaks time apart. And wakes.

## Recorder

1.

Through the wall between us,  
my father coughed. His torn breath  
broke my mind, and my mind became  
a mirror. A microphone. A wire.  
A thin metallic diaphragm fluttering,  
awake. And there I saw myself  
twisted: a dull scissor, a black piece  
of my turtle's cracked shell. Later,  
hidden in a teenage notebook,  
I'm bent and plastered with photos:  
a nuclear reactor, jellyfish bloom, a bible  
become compost (its binding burst,  
its cover sprouting mushrooms). This  
is a picture of time filling up. This  
is how a person begins.

2.

I was told I was Matthew. A gift,  
a collector of debts. A child in bed,  
afraid of sunlight cut by the blinds,  
wavering in yellow pools. Alone,  
cross-legged beneath the blue ash,  
I was a book the year was writing.  
A record at the wrong speed.  
I was a camera. Clover. Milkweed.  
Wind and shadow. A favorite frayed net  
hanging from the rim. I said to her,  
*All I am is memories. Does that make*  
*sense to you?* Is that a child?  
How long does something like that  
get to live? Does it become a map  
bleeding, breathing with the minutes?  
Does it become a pharmacy? A bank?



3.

A mind is not a room  
but I sit inside it. Through oaks  
the light streams into the windows,  
pooling in my spine, my teeth.  
It wants me out. Wants out of me.  
Hormones, enzymes, bright  
snags in the synaptic cleft. This  
is where my future appears:  
a hand grown tense, fumbling,  
grasping for solutions, spirits,  
smoke. A capsule is my correction.  
Its syntax becomes my own.  
Each night, I waken the engine,  
the cancelled fruit, the panther  
with a world behind its eyes,  
with its breath of clover and honey,  
and I listen long to the planet  
in the radio, to the youngest song  
as it empties. As it quits.

4.

The eternal is not endlessness.  
It is not a book's. Wreathed  
around itself, it is time as a crown  
of cornflowers. Blue. A blue sun  
flaring and folding itself back in  
like timelapse, blossoming eyes.  
But I can't hold it. I cut and paste.  
I tear a piece from the edge  
and smear the glue. In dreams,  
the movie I direct is my own eye's  
disbelief at seeing. *To witness*  
*is to steal*. Or is it *save*? Is it life  
I'm paying back with pictures  
of pictures taken, with this black bag  
full of documents? Is that a face  
blooming in the static? A nest  
cemented in the earth?

5.

In a story I kept telling, each moment  
stitched into the next, and I heard  
in the seams and patches a music  
moaning beneath the yellow grass.  
In the corner, a rusty rake. An eye.  
In the yard, a lone pale spider  
cupped in my friend's hand.  
Before, I studied the prints  
of my teenage father mowing graves.  
My mother as a girl playing  
at her own perfectly ordered desk.  
(A scent of asphalt and gasoline.  
Wires on a tarred, wooden pole.)  
For so long, I was only a person  
trapped in a classroom, in a dream,  
trying to decide what stayed  
and what I could erase.

# A Dark Address

*for W.S. Graham*

What else left to say or  
send from where we are?

Still one keeps looking  
for pathways through what

ever the darkness is now,  
carrying products, debts,

contracts for our speech.  
Are you there? I know

one can never be sure  
where our voices go, out

among screens and wires,  
the satellites drifting like

strange, lost kites. Here,  
my listening's compass

falters like an old toy—  
its needle fidgeting

in the plastic case I hold  
as if it were my father's.

My father's fathers  
and all our mothers, all

whisper a name down  
in an endless game of

telephone. But here,  
where I pick up alive

there's no one home.  
Sometimes, I spend

whole days listening so  
far down into the glacier

I become something  
I don't think people are:

wires tap each synapse—  
sentences end and end.

Is it any different for  
you where you are?

Do things get through?  
I won't lie to you—

much is bad and takes  
too much away. Is it OK

we keep turning ourselves  
into words the world

hides inside? A breath  
might be a commune

or commodity. I find it  
very hard to tell. The skin

and distances we live in  
wish and wish while

the dead dream a future  
unseen to the living.

Yes. It is like that.  
I hope the radio is on

where you are. I hope  
you can play this back.



# A Song for Who We Are

*to Molly*

I spend my days trying  
to break through to all

youth taught me to ignore.  
I learned with the mind

of a cold wraith sure  
only of needing police

to tell me I was right.  
I asked their sentences

to show me what I was—  
what I was was always

fumbling, fucked-up, drunk,  
and numb. At times

there was no life but mine—  
then there was no life at all.

\*

This morning, you told me  
of a picture you saw showing

a dead blue whale's  
four-hundred pound heart.

Scientists had preserved it  
and it hung like some

insane, ancient mechanism  
built with reeds and clay

and human skin. In it,  
holes the size of heads

that looked like wounds  
were places life once

streamed in rich and warm.  
Pulses. Echoes. Songs

like screams entwining  
and cradling the very sea.

\*

I know another story—  
I could tell it like news:

our world of knowers,  
of officers and weapons,

of those who try and err,  
filling the water with

test blasts of noise  
killing the whales' talk

and songs. And I do—  
I go ahead and tell it.

But it's only me again,  
telling us how I think.

And maybe that's OK—  
you're listening to us too—

but for one from nowhere,  
where roots were a noise

no music hid, where debt  
was a song I sang even

when I was only laughing,  
drunk, lost inside a jail

of talk with no one I knew—  
for one like that, like me,

it takes years of being  
nothing to learn how not

to split apart, into my head,  
each time life comes close.

\*

And it does. Life insists.  
It writes itself in me, in us,

till our hearts and eyes  
look like worn recordings.

Things pale. Between us,  
the light works harder to show.

Was it you who told me  
“To record is to know by heart”?

It’s right in the root: *-cord*  
as in *cardiac*, *cordial*, *dis-*

*cord*, *courage*. Maybe  
these receipts and records

of what we were are not  
our ghosts. Perhaps

they keep our pulse. This.  
This and this. That’s us.

That’s the song between us

finding a way to change.

It calls me again. I'm here.  
And it's you, somewhere,

awake in your morning chair,  
calling me to everything.

\*



## A Story About The Liver

Evenness is its virtue.  
Organ of wood, of roots,  
it tempers the sped blood,  
mothering and toning its richness.  
In one tradition, it belongs  
to spring, to budding forces  
fusing what's buried deep  
to all that branches, flowers,  
and falls free. Daily,  
its work turns through cycles  
timed to the sun's changes,  
and in sleep, it begins to cleanse,  
releasing dross and poison.

For those full of ills,  
this troubles dreams.  
Old crimes kept buried  
rise and branch jaggedly,  
and each twisted limb  
mars your lover's face.  
Fear belongs to the liver.  
It chases you into anything  
you aren't, just to hide.  
Like this: a small stone  
in dandelion and thistle.  
Free of interiors, of organs  
and secrets—it is immune,  
sheltered among the weeds.

A small boy finds its place.  
In his frayed pocket,  
he carries the stone home  
where he washes it in rosewater  
and bores a hole through its core  
to let the air pass through.  
He clasps it in sleep. He  
teaches it to breathe, to feel,

to listen as he whispers,  
*Once, you were my body.*  
Then you wake. Alone.  
The sweat on your cold skin  
is the mark of all you tried to hide.  
It's no use. The sun can read.  
The air is your own mind.

## Rilke's Sappho

*after* New Poems (1907)

i.

In the mall, music comes from everywhere. It says I am in love. I am a boy surrounded by books on other vampires, on their hunger. Here, I see you being seen. I see me. In the fountain, beneath the skylight, the chlorinated water preserves each coin's dead voice: "Give me what I want. Give my want to me." Where does it all come from? Why would that girl wade into the water up to her knees, being stupid, daring the strange cops? It's that song again. In my mind, the fountain's plastic pipes branch down under the neon tile, their lattice of veins sutured to the source with a timer. The reservoir. The elsewhere. There.

ii. *Sappho to Eranna*

Like noise

I want to blur in you—

to flaunt you,

adorned with ink and weeds.

That's my ghost,

crazing across your face,

studying you

like police.

These,

my plastic arms,

go right through you

like dying does,

to turn your splayed nerves over

to all of it,

to the sprawl we are,

to all the doubled

and hiding

things.

iii.

In her blood, something wakes to itself, blind and molting. Each syllable's hiss turns to a hum inside her. She hums it. Who is she now? Her name was stolen away: she is She Who Cannot Hide. And she can't. She's there. With her telephone, in the dead mall, the singer beside her stares, studying how this one's soul is a naked ear. Each millisecond, the song blurs and grafts new neurons between their arms, their hair. The song is silt. Pollen. Polyethylene. Now Eranna is almost lost. She'd go missing forever for the singer who stares. Gone. Into the song.



iv.

Living on betrayal, our souls  
scatter everywhere. All ears,  
  
they fray in dark filaments—  
tangled in weeds, grafting  
  
each stranger's voice. Tonight,  
a whisper from nowhere  
  
wears my listening like a mask,  
saying, *flower-muscle, fountain-*  
  
*mouth, tall tree in the ear.* No,  
no soul will keep. Called to,  
  
it wakes, it flees. Come here,  
little warden, little maniac,  
  
take this. Let it not be anything —  
let my song mistake your face.

v.

Just after “The Song of the Women to the Poet,” in “The Poet’s Death,” the poet is propped in bed. He is a boy again, sick of his room, bored with love. His eye seeks the rippling window glass and, past it, earth and limestone, grasses beside the sterile, trembling waters. Listen. He is no longer there. What that song had been is now this unlaced shoe. That bottle of pills. A fig. One distracted, little fly. For a moment, Death, the copyist, lets us take this in. Then we flip the page, and the next song begins to hide.

## What Passes Between

“But the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul,  
and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him.”

—I Samuel 16:14

### 1. *David*

In darkness, I send each wavelength

against the glitch  
in a screaming

brain. In reeking sheets, the king

eats God’s  
amphetamine.

He tracks the camera’s eye, feeling

for informants,  
trip-wires,

testing the air for traps. Beside him,

my hands  
bend notes

of carnelian & pericardium, of blessed

flaws  
mending

and mending the jagged seam, feeling

as he un-  
stitches it again.

2. *Saul*

I know a stuck channel, I know

a sentence  
that ends

and ends. All I was I learned

in bonemeal,  
in dampened ash:

how night sifts though, how day

pales,  
and a boy

is a piece of the darkness.

I tried,  
Lord,

to find what your mind was after

but it only tore  
my voice

in two. Here, in your echoes,

I paw,  
I err—

and it's like a little dance, a ritual

to reveal  
the way

each answer only cuts the music

out of me,  
shuts its lips,

and begins to make it pay.

## The Pieces

Turning back, outside myself,  
I feel my mind fill with a light

of dead rooms, their furniture,  
a stranger's lamp and telescope,

a shard of limestone pocked  
with tiny fossils, pictures

of cancer cells in pink, frozen  
on a torn page in a textbook,

1989. Time moves through  
a series of destroyed circles.

Memorizing as I go, I try  
to build a perfect manikin

whose stitched-in eyes keep  
all things in their living form.

But I think something's wrong—  
something tore out his tongue.

\*

Watching circles tumble into heaps,  
Walter Benjamin asked history

to pry apart its old sentences  
and awaken an angel, an image

of the dead made true, the music  
as it listened to itself. In return,

war traps him at the border,  
a future kills itself with pills.



Gutted turtle, your ruined house  
becomes a lyre, your maker's name

a planet whose seasons turn  
Earth's language back on itself.

We wade into a sea of glitches,  
wires cut, messages drowned out

in the space between. Here  
our words all come out backward.

\*

Even eternity sees we're scared.  
We hide in anything. Tonight,

I become this piece of twist-tie  
crumpled up in a kitchen drawer.

This bent and rusted paper-clip.  
I root around my mind's rooms,

burying pictures of those times  
my face became a sign for another

to decipher and conceal from me.  
Can you ever read what's missed?

One night, somebody I loved said  
I was dead wrong if I thought

I could ever become immune—  
from her, from me. Anything.

It's been almost twenty years  
and I keep learning what she meant.

\*

Ransacked drawers. Torn receipts.  
Thumbtacks left in an old mug.

Ten years behind myself.  
Ten years till the seas go wrong,

till each neuron is a police camera,  
till the Amazon's green lungs are ash.

The present keeps waking into its dream.  
The same alarm goes off.

Through a palimpsest of skies,  
the insane angel gazes down

and its two eyes collapse into  
a twisted mouth saying nothing.

Lovesick, reaching from eternity,  
it hands me only this dead battery,

those weeds caught in the porchlight,  
these frightened voices on a page.

\*

## The Book of Rules

“Yes, I was my father and I was my son,  
I asked myself questions and answered as best I could”

—Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*

“Behold: I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.”

—King Saul (I Samuel 26:21)

1.

They teach you to consult it. To cast its coins, its knowing stones. It tells you every wrong will be made clear. Every glitch fixed. It runs through futures, pasts, dreams. Through fascia, nerve and bone. It prophesies. It puts in place. And you begin to mistake it, thinking a heart is nothing, and an eye, its shield, is all. Soon you turn to it for everything. On waking. On greeting each night’s attack. You scatter them and read the Yes, the No—and You, the space between.

2.

Children in Sunday school. Their teacher, someone's mother, hands out small red-and-black boxes that once held checkbooks. Removing the lids, the children follow instructions, stringing rubber bands around each half. These were their harps. Decorating with glue and glitter, strumming the dead strings, distracted, the kids listened to stories: of a boy who sang, of a king trapped in a nightmare, cursed. There, sitting in the blue plastic chairs, their minds drift in the dead music. They dream, and the dream writes them down.

3.     *Saul's Song*

Nightly, between wake and sleep,  
    faces show—antic, unknowable—  
  
twisting behind my eyes. From my middle,  
    a cold shiver rises into the chest and bursts,  
  
flaring into black tendrils. They clasp the heart—  
    mouthless, blind—feeling their way in.  
  
Till dawn, I lie with a golden song,  
    falling like a cool, chlorinated dew  
  
killing the holy membrane's germ. Here,  
    where I trap the air in certainty,  
  
what love I have begins to give, to break,  
    drifting like a fine ash across my shield,  
  
my sheath, my cracked knees and eyes.  
    My mind is quickened by what it flees—  
  
this stumbling, knowing nothing,  
    that talks me toward the end.

4.

Ohio. 1991. A town of three thousand souls. Dead storefronts. Cracked panes. Beside me, in his tiny desk, the boy whose bed was a floor. Behind, writing his jagged name, the one who pissed himself, whose answers failed, whose father terrorized his mind. Debts. Ancient verses. A room inside each head where a king sits up, dreaming, being dreamed.

\*

*A net of living wires, entangled in others gone dead,  
screaming through viscera, toward corroded inputs in  
bone, in cortex, skin. From beneath their network,  
ghosts field waves of noise, feeding on drowned, recycled  
signals, wedding their fragments, sending errors and  
wonders through the fuses, through the heart, the ear.*

\*

At fourteen, I ended my life as it had been. No more teams, no words. I wanted to be no one. A cancelled sign. “He just quit everything. Just sits at home with his guitar I guess.” There, drawing feedback out in waves, whalesongs, cracked pleas. And inside it, I threw myself away, listening for something to break apart. To give.

5.

In one version, King Saul died by his own hand. In a wasted field taken by the enemy, he fell on his spear, his face blooming with a halo of sparks, a smell of burnt plastic.

In another, he called to a boy who was lost, hiding in the weeds nearby. Terrified, the boy pretended not to hear, cradling his eyes, burying his hands in thistle. But Saul approached. He reached out his hand, passing the spear, and told the boy what he wanted.

And the boy understood, and he did what the man could not.



## Coda

To hide in a story's boxes.  
To turn to its scenes like stones  
whose crazed patterns magnetize  
and fracture. No one's here.  
Just air. Just this cardboard harp  
whose ghost music fills with  
lost cries and calls. Listen. Saturn  
turned my eye into a camera.  
The Lord put a wire in my heart.  
A son with blood in my ears,  
I kept asking, *Is it this one? This?*  
*Is this what the music wants?*  
Some days, I study things to dust.  
Some, I want to let in anybody  
to tell them a voice can be enough,  
these shields and harps are toys  
and the fathers a mind invents  
are only frightened, frowning kids  
lost inside the rulebook. Here,  
their heads keep breaking apart,  
cast like pollen into the strange air  
that surrounds us, listening.

\*

## Music for the Wasteful Thinker

Freed of certainties,

one's mind

twists clear of its head. Bad air

lifts.

Lymph,

ringing, tempers in its turns.

Fathered, un-

fathered,

one becomes this world's womb,

its ear

and pupil—

its surround.

A laving, mid-day light,

shot through with

spore &

pollen,

fills with meetings and exchange:

this glass, this

wood's

bowl,

this

still sparrow's pose.

These

weave

and hinge. They be-

come what one,  
confused,

adrift with music,

holds.

Then

mind  
balks:

it thinks it thinks.

Wrecking its nests, shredding its

wild  
mycelium,

mind says

it's only itself again—

it's only

*this*—

and seizes each thing that gives.

## Dispersal

The partial veil of  
the mushroom

tears,

reveals its  
stem

joined with the gilled cap's  
frail underside.

Flecked with primordia,

its damp soil is  
woven through with

rhizomic,  
pale mycelium.

It threads and eats.

It nourishes.

When the fruit first shows amid grassblades,

its form is fugitive  
& slight.

From its bare, broad face—

fanning and  
darkened over—

its each spore is cast afield

as dust

to come anew.

## Cicada

Emerged from earth,

each larval  
nymph

steadies, crawls,

and shivers off its husk.

These

are the forest's rich cancer.

Hidden everywhere,

their thin,  
scattering music

reveals each tree

a larynx

as leaves'  
shadows'

platelets

loosen and clot.

Slowly,

singing wanes.

From high, green  
cluttered limbs,

the virgin dead fall down  
for mouths of

fox &

bullfrog.

None keep what they are.

In evening's new quiet,  
each buried egg starts  
calling the years down

into the soil's  
slow mania  
for birth.

## Bloom: I

In the sick, warming sea,

blooms of jellyfish  
thicken.

Where once the dense,

mouthed  
shoals of bluefin swam,

the folding,  
mesogleal bells now

pulse.

Unrivalled,

in love with the wave,  
the remaining

haunt and drift.

At Diablo Canyon,

on a coastline fault,

seawater used to cool  
nuclear turbines

returns to the open

warmed.

When emergency shuts the system down,

intelligence,  
at pains,



finds the massive intake filter

choked

with the lifeless, lulled,  
translucent forms

who'd answered the calling warmth.

## Bloom: II

Along the lip  
of its body's bell

a fringe of calcium crystals

orients the jellyfish  
to gravity. Held

in pockets,

the crystals graze nearby hairs

whose motion  
neurons translate into up

or down.

In this, a jellyfish  
steadies into its sea the way

a human ear

rights its body upon ground.

Having bred sixty-thousand jellyfish  
in orbit around the Earth, in bags

of artificial sea,

NASA discovered in those medusae  
later released into our oceans

difficult,  
erratic pulses:

their down was

up, their

here  
there.

Here, when those stones

in the labyrinth of a human ear

fail in their charge,

the vertigo it scripts into  
the neurons' plastic map

says no,

one is not right with the ground.

## At the Turn

1.

Low tide:  
anemone

keep to their holds.

Hermit crabs  
lulled &

jostled by pooling surf

settle.

Turning,

she steps,

rock by  
rock,

placing and re-  
placing my attention:

tidepool,  
curlew,  
fronds of  
dulse.

Her clear,

dark eyes

greet each given thing.

And I look with her,  
trying to learn

each name and way.

Then something shifts—

I drift.

2.

Tangled in wrack,  
the gull's white feathers

stain  
and break.

Spread open on its hinge,

the thin,  
brittle ribcage

bares to the stranger's lens

its ruined bowl of

bright,  
jagged plastic  
scraps.

Nothing here is home.

A gull's eye,  
primed for light's

quick, surfacing flash

places  
trust

& spikes its gut with trash.

3.

In one version, she

of earliest chaos

was *Tiamat*:

dark,  
glistening

lover of the abyss.

By the time of *Genesis*,  
she was called

*tehom*—  
the watery deep

on which the spirit of YHVH moved.

In time,

she was not called at all: she was

nothing –  
the *nihilo*

from which a lone, minded will

made the world

his own.

\*

Last night out of a dream I woke,

drenched, mid-  
sentence

in the shivering curse

nightmare works into my tongue.

Beside me,  
she asks,

*What. What is it. What.*

And it's nothing—

it's always  
nothing—

meeting its face in the dark.

4.

Before life was,

deep  
blindly

turned upon

deep.

Something got shocked awake.

Pulsing,  
spun,

the bits now  
urged and hungered—

they'd become.

Cells  
split

& fused—  
grew

mouths.

Forms changed. Eyes. Minds'

stores of  
copied  
light

pictured and re-

pictured all. Need became want—

heart,  
thought.

Words tried to say what was—

*who*—

and there we were.



5.

My eyes trace a tern's

swift  
buffeted  
arc

to where she kneels  
on an outcrop of eroded rock,

studying changes.

She turns & her hands,

powdered with sand,

brush themselves against old jeans  
that lay on our floor that morning.

I watch her face's  
pale oval

tilt down as she rises, and

before she sees me—  
before her eyes beam

and she returns

to the world we keep between us—

her light's strange scattering

shines,  
apart,

and my mind's will dies

to greet it.

## Acknowledgments

Poems from this collection have appeared in *Glass*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Pleiades*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Salamander*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

\*

My sincere thanks to those friends and teachers over the years who read versions of this work and offered commentary. Your insights helped me to break through limitations and create the work as it now stands.

Extra special thanks to Molly Covington who was essential in helping me design the cover.

\*

The poem "A Dark Address" makes use of motifs and at least one quotation from the poetry of W.S. Graham (1918-86), to whose ghost the poem is addressed.

"Rilke's Sappho" is in dialogue with Rainer Maria Rilke's work in general, but especially the first eighteen poems in his *New Poems* (1907). The second, third, and fifth sections of my poem, respectively, are very free adaptations of his "Sappho to Eranna," "Eranna to Sappho," and "The Poet's Death" from that 1907 volume. There are also phrases quoted freely from *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. In all this, Edward Snow's translations have been my guides (North Point Press, 1984 & 2009)

"The Book of Rules" draws on (and fictionalizes) elements of the story of King Saul as told in the book of Samuel. My primary source for this has been Robert Alter's translation, published as *The David Story* (W.W. Norton & Co, 1999). Section one loosely alludes to the Urim and Thummim, the Hebrew oracle repeatedly consulted by Saul.

Both parts of "Bloom" are indebted to Lisa-Ann Gershwin's work on jellyfish.

"At the Turn" is in dialogue with Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge, 2002), especially in its third sectionn.



R.M. Haines was raised in a rural, southwestern Ohio town of about 3,500 people. A first generation college graduate, he eventually earned an MFA and PhD, living for a time in California and later Texas. Presently, he lives in Indiana, where he works as an adjunct instructor in writing.

New poems as well as essays are regularly featured on his blog at [rmhaines.com](http://rmhaines.com).